

Empowering Tribal Communities: Evaluating Awareness and Challenges of The Forest Rights Act, 2006

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ABSTRACT

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, represents a significant step toward addressing historical injustices faced by tribal and forest-dependent communities. By recognizing their rightful claims over forest land and resources, the Act aims to empower these marginalized groups, promote sustainable livelihoods, and ensure participatory forest governance. This study evaluates the awareness, knowledge, and perception of forest-dwelling communities regarding the provisions and processes of the Act, highlighting its impact and implementation challenges. The study adopts a descriptive research methodology, utilizing interviews with 300 respondents to gather comprehensive data. Through analysis conducted using SPSS software, the findings reveal critical gaps in awareness, with most respondents unaware of their rights and legal procedures under the Act. Challenges such as perceived financial barriers, harassment by forest officials, and limited access to forest resources remain significant hindrances to the Act's implementation. This research underscores the importance of targeted interventions to raise awareness, simplify procedures, and foster community engagement. It highlights the need for greater accountability and inclusivity to ensure the Act fulfils its potential as a tool for justice and equity. By addressing these challenges, the FRA can transform tribal communities into empowered stakeholders in sustainable forest governance.

Keywords: Awareness and Knowledge; Community Participation; Forest Rights Act (FRA); Tribal Empowerment; Sustainable Governance

INTRODUCTION

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), also known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, is a landmark piece of legislation in Indian history (Upadhyay, 2025). By acknowledging their legitimate claims to forest land and resources, the Act strives to remedy historical wrongs and address the long-standing marginalization of tribal and forest-dependent groups (Kashwan, 2013). In addition to empowering marginalised groups, this historic law seeks to balance ecological sustainability with human livelihoods, promoting fair forest governance and conservation methods (Dawson et al., 2021).

Recognising their strong historical, cultural, and spiritual ties to forests, the FRA focusses especially on the Forest-Dwelling Scheduled Tribes (FDST) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFD) (Sekar, 2024). It provides a range of rights, such as protections against relocation, individual land rights, and community rights to manage and conserve resources. Fundamentally, the Act emphasises the value of participatory governance through organisations like the Gramme Sabha and Forest Rights Committees (FRCs), while integrating justice, sustainability, and empowerment (Das, 2024). By doing this, the Act seeks to reconcile these communities' livelihoods with forest conservation and restore their customary custodianship.

However, the intended beneficiaries' knowledge and comprehension of the Act's provisions are crucial to its success in accomplishing these goals (Poureslami et al., 2017). Key knowledge and participation gaps are highlighted by the data gathered. For example, a majority of respondents still do not fully understand the Act's rights, even though most of them are aware of them. The Act's execution is also severely hampered by issues like low legal knowledge, financial obstacles in the claims process, and allegations of harassment by forest officials (Albiston et al., 2014). Just had gained access to forest resources they were previously denied, while they had no rights under the Act (Das, 2019). These results highlight the critical need for focused communication initiatives to raise awareness, expedite the claims procedure, and remove structural barriers.

Tribal and forest-dwelling populations could become active participants in forest governance through the Act's ability to close gaps in knowledge and engagement (Elias et al., 2020). This article explores the FRA's many provisions and ramifications, examining how it affects resource access, land ownership, and cultural empowerment. In order to design successful interventions that guarantee the Act achieves its intended aims of justice, equity, and sustainability, it is essential to comprehend the ground realities represented in the data (Bennett et al., 2019). In addition to demonstrating India's dedication to inclusive governance, the FRA establishes a standard for striking a balance between ecological preservation and social development on a worldwide scale (Srinivas et al., 2020).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study's main goal is to evaluate the degree of engagement, awareness, and understanding that communities living in forests have about the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). The study intends to identify the gaps and challenges faced by these communities by looking at important areas like landholding status, the type of land held, occupation, awareness of rights and legal procedures, participation in Gramme Sabha and Forest Rights Committee (FRC) meetings, and opinions regarding the implementation of the Act. The study also aims to investigate how much the Act has helped the respondents access forest resources, asserted their rights, and gotten over past obstacles. The ultimate goal of this study is to shed light on the FRA's efficacy and offer doable solutions to improve its application.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The potential for this study to support the fair and efficient application of the Forest Rights Act is what makes it significant. Understanding the facts on the ground is essential since the FRA aims to empower marginalised tribal and forest-dwelling groups and right historical wrongs. The data from this study highlights important gaps in participation, legal accessibility, and awareness. Significant percentages of respondents, for example, do not completely understand their rights (53.33%) or encounter obstacles while trying to utilise forest resources (63.33%), suggesting that the Act's intended beneficiaries are not being properly benefited.

The results also point to structural issues such the claims process's alleged budgetary limitations, the harassment that forest officials have been known to inflict, and the limited realisation of community rights. In order for qualified individuals to actively engage in and benefit from the FRA, these difficulties must be resolved. In order to promote inclusivity and trust, this study also highlights the significance of increasing knowledge, encouraging community involvement, and fortifying institutional structures like the Gramme Sabha and FRCs.

The study offers practical insights that can help politicians, activists, and implementers close the gaps and increase the Act's impact by recording the lived experiences of the forest-dependent communities and their interactions with the FRA. It positions this study as an essential instrument for promoting inclusive governance and fair advancement by adding to the broader conversation on social justice, sustainable development, and conservation.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study used descriptive research to assess respondents' understanding of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. This method was chosen to accurately portray forest-dwelling populations' awareness, understanding, and impressions of the Act's provisions and

implementation. Data was collected using an interview schedule to get detailed information from interviewees. Structured questions covered FRA topics such rights awareness, legal procedures, Gramme Sabha and Forest Rights Committee (FRC) participation, and effectiveness. The study included 300 forest-dependent community members to provide a representative sample. This gave the study varied viewpoints on the Act's impact and implementation. SPSS was used to analyse the data. This ensured precise and efficient data processing, revealing crucial patterns, trends, and insights. The investigation used descriptive statistics to understand respondents' FRA awareness, perceptions, and problems. Results were presented and analysed descriptively, providing logical and coherent insights into respondents' experiences. To comprehend respondents' realities, the findings were logically analysed. The analysis sought to uncover knowledge gaps, participation impediments, and FRA implementation perceptions. The descriptive analysis of the data yields actionable insights that can guide policy suggestions and initiatives to improve the Act. This methodology guarantees that the study addresses the key objectives and contributes to the discourse on social justice, sustainable development, and governance by providing a detailed and trustworthy knowledge of the FRA's impact on forest-dwelling communities.

RESULTS

The data clearly shows respondents' landholding status. Each of the 300 respondents (100%) claimed owning land, whereas none (0%) did not. This shows that this study carefully sampled only landholders to ensure the applicability of the data while analysing their awareness and understanding of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The respondents' homogeneous landholding status makes it a fascinating cohort to analyse, as the Act focusses on land rights and forest resources. By focussing on landowners, the study can assess their awareness and knowledge of Act rights. This data also shows that the Act may directly affect this population, making their comments useful for studying how well the law empowers landholders, especially tribal and traditional forest-dwelling people. Respondents own a variety of land. Of the 300 responders, 63.33%—190—held both Patta (private) and forest land. Most respondents have mixed ownership, indicating a dependence on both private and communal or forest resources for their livelihoods.

In addition, 80 respondents (26.66%) owned just forest land. A large portion of the population relies primarily on forest lands, emphasising the importance of forest rights and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Just 30 respondents (10%) claimed owning Patta land, which is private. Respondents are strongly linked to forest resources, either partially or fully. This highlights the importance of the Forest Rights Act in protecting their rights and ensuring sustainable access to these resources. The prevalence of mixed landholders highlights the need for legislation and awareness efforts that address their particular difficulties and benefits from using private and forest land. Respondents' jobs are diverse. 110 (36.66%) of 300 respondents live off forest land or produce. This shows how woods and natural resources support a large share of the population. It also stresses the necessity of regulations like the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, in protecting their rights and access to natural resources.

Private employees make up the second-largest category, with 95 respondents (31.66%). This suggests a shift towards various economic prospects and more private job market participation. 90 responders (30%) are daily wage labourers, demonstrating the community's casual and transient employment. Economic uncertainty may make protecting their rights and resources even more important. Finally, 5 responders (1.66%) are government employees. Although small, this percentage indicates a small presence of stable, formal employment in the neighbourhood. The occupational distribution shows that a large section of the population relies on forest resources while also showing different livelihood possibilities. Such insights are essential for creating occupational group-specific awareness campaigns and policies. Survey respondents' understanding of all rights under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 shows a significant knowledge gap. Of the 300 responders, 140 (46.66%) knew all their Act rights. This shows that roughly half of respondents know their entitlements and forest resource protection rules. The remaining 160 respondents (53.33%) were unaware of all Act rights. This majority shows a knowledge gap that may restrict the Act's ability to empower forest-dwelling populations. These folks may not completely exercise their rights or benefit from their protections without appropriate awareness.

This data emphasises the necessity for targeted outreach and education campaigns to educate forest-dependent communities about the Act. Bridge this information gap to empower the law's intended beneficiaries to claim and preserve their rights. The assessed population's understanding of the laws, procedures, and eligibility criteria for claiming rights under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 is low. Only 120 of 300 respondents—40%—knew these crucial points. This shows that a minority of respondents know how to assert their rights under the Act's legal and procedural framework. However, 180 respondents—60%—lacked awareness of the regulations, procedures, and eligibility criteria. Lack of understanding may prevent many eligible individuals from accessing the Act's rights and safeguards, highlighting a key impediment to its effective implementation. This knowledge gap highlights the need for specific educational and outreach activities to equip forest-dependent communities with the Act's benefits.

The findings emphasise the need to close this knowledge gap to ensure that the Act recognises and protects tribal and traditional forest-dwelling people's rights. Respondents' knowledge of Gramme Sabha meetings and claim submission helps them understand these key components of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Most of the 300 respondents—180, 60%—know about Grama Sabha meetings and claim submission. This shows that responders are aware of the Act, which is good for its participatory aspect. 100 respondents (33.33%) were ignorant of these methods. This shows that a large percentage of the population may be excluded from the rights-claiming process owing to lack of knowledge. Additionally, 20 respondents (6.66%) were unsure regarding Gramme Sabha sessions and the claim submission process, emphasising the need for better communication.

This distribution implies that while most are knowledgeable, a considerable knowledge gap remains. Raising awareness and providing clear, accessible information regarding Gramme Sabha meetings and claim submission could empower more people to actively engage and profit from the Act. Such actions would increase the Act's recognition and protection of forest-dwelling groups' rights. In Gramme Sabha sessions over The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, respondents' engagement levels vary. Out of 300 respondents, 170 (56.66%) had attended such sessions. This suggests that most respondents are involved in the Gramme Sabha, which discusses and decides Act claims. Their participation shows a favourable trend in local government and decision-making. 130 respondents (43.33%) said they have not attended these meetings. This high percentage of non-participants implies that some people find Gramme Sabha participation difficult. Lack of awareness, logistical difficulties, or indifference in the process are examples. These persons may benefit less from the Act because the Gramme Sabha recognises and processes claims.

The research emphasises the necessity for focused Gramme Sabha involvement activities, especially among the uninvolved. Addressing barriers to participation can help the community achieve the Act's goals for all eligible beneficiaries. The Forest Rights Committee (FRC) and its meetings received mixed reviews, indicating varying satisfaction. Of 300 respondents, 120 (40%) were satisfied with the FRC and its meetings. This suggests that many respondents find the committee's work and meetings effective and beneficial, meeting their needs. 110 respondents (36.66%) indicated dissatisfaction. This shows that a significant portion of the population feels the FRC and its meetings are not providing their needs or addressing their problems. Dissatisfaction may result from perceived inefficiencies, lack of inclusivity, or unresolved issues. In addition, 70 respondents (23.33%) were undecided. This group appears uncertain or indifferent, suggesting low engagement or insufficient information regarding committee operations and choices.

The distribution of replies highlights the need for FRC effectiveness, transparency, and communication and outreach to develop trust and understanding among respondents. Addressing unhappy respondents' concerns and actively engaging undecided respondents may increase community support and involvement. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, was viewed differently by respondents. Most of the 300 respondents—190 (63.33%)—called the process "moderate." This shows that most responders have mixed feelings about the procedure, balancing positive and bad experiences. Meanwhile, 80 (26.66%) said the process was "good." This shows a small but significant group of people who see the Act's execution and procedural components as effective and beneficial. However, 30 respondents (10%) called the procedure "poor," indicating unhappiness with its implementation. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of

accessibility, and lack of awareness undoubtedly hindered this group's procedure. While most respondents rank the procedure as moderate, the presence of both satisfied and dissatisfied respondents highlights the need for modifications to address issues and improve the Act's efficiency and inclusivity. Strengthening the process could improve results and stakeholder satisfaction.

Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 rights show considerable discrepancies among responders. Only 110 (36.66%) of 300 respondents acknowledged Act-protected individual rights. This suggests that few people have gained personal entitlements like land and resource ownership. Only 10 respondents (3.33%) reported enjoying community rights. This shows even poorer awareness of collective rights under the Act, such as the ability to protect and manage forest resources as a community. This low percentage suggests community rights implementation or comprehension deficiencies. Most responders, 180 (60%), indicated no Act rights. This indicates a large gap in the Act's aims, which is alarming. Lack of understanding, claims process hurdles, or Act implementation issues may be to blame.

These findings highlight the urgent need to close awareness and implementation gaps. Enhancing outreach, streamlining the claims procedure, and removing barriers could help more qualified individuals and communities exercise their Act rights. Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 land claimants show a division in engagement with the claim's procedure. Out of 300 responders, 130 (43.33%) claimed Act land rights. This shows that many people have actively sought their entitlements, demonstrating awareness and proactive participation in the Act's implementation. Overall, 56.67% of 170 respondents have not claimed land rights under the Act. This shows that more than half of respondents may suffer claims procedure hurdles. Lack of awareness, procedural understanding, or system navigation may cause these hurdles.

The findings suggest targeted education and outreach programs that guide and support rights seekers could fill these gaps. Ensuring that all qualified beneficiaries can engage in the claim's procedure will improve the Act's efficacy and inclusivity. Whether respondents were able to acquire forest resources denied before the 2006 Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act shows a significant gap in its effectiveness. Only 110 (36.66%) of 300 respondents claimed access to these forest resources. The Act has helped some people restore rights to resources they need for their livelihoods. The majority of 190 respondents (63.33%) said they cannot harvest the forest resources prohibited earlier. This high percentage indicates Act implementation issues. Administrative delays, improper enforcement, and claims process impediments are examples. These findings may also indicate that the Act has not fully reached or benefited all eligible individuals, leaving a significant proportion without vital resources.

This data shows the need for stronger implementation strategies to ensure equal access to forest resources for all rightful recipients. By removing these obstacles, the Act can better recognise and protect tribal and forest-dwelling populations' rights. Respondents' opinion of financial impediments to claiming land rights under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, is high. Of 300 respondents, 60 (20%) think legal procedures are cost-effective. This minority finds the claims process costly or difficult. However, 240 respondents (80%) believe legal procedures are not cost-effective. This high rate suggests that many eligible people are deterred from claiming property rights due to the financial burden. Legal expenditures, documentation charges, and other procedural costs may exceed plaintiffs' financial capacity.

This data emphasises the necessity for reasonable and accessible claims processes. Subsidising expenses, expediting procedures, or supporting claimants could help remove these barriers and guarantee the Act benefits all qualified individuals. The pattern of respondents' attitudes on forest officials harassing them while collecting resources is worrying. Most of the 300 respondents—220 (73.33%)—reported harassment. This shows forest-dependent populations confront extensive hurdles and impediments that may hinder their access to livelihood-sustaining resources. This harassment may also prevent people from exercising their rights under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Only 80 respondents (26.66%) reported not been harassed. This suggests that some people have been able to take forest resources without interruption, but the data highlights a serious situation that needs quick attention. The high rate of reported harassment highlights the need for strong measures to hold forest officials accountable and protect tribal and

traditional forest-dwelling people. These findings emphasise the need for a more inclusive and supportive forest resource collecting environment. Implementing the Act better, raising awareness in affected areas, and monitoring official conduct can assist solve this essential issue.

DISCUSSION

The tribal and forest-dwelling groups interact with the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, the data analysis for this study offers important insights into the realities on the ground. The results paint a complex picture of participation rates, awareness levels, and the obstacles to the Act's successful implementation.

A sizable percentage of respondents still do not know enough about the Act's contents and procedures, even though some showed awareness of their rights and participated actively in Grama Sabha and Forest Rights Committee (FRC) meetings. These communities' ability to properly exercise their rights and take use of the protections provided by the Act is compromised by this lack of information. The information also shows a gap between the FRA's theoretical foundation and its actual application in practice. Systemic problems that require attention are highlighted by significant obstacles such the impression of financial obstacles in the claim's procedure (Marsh & McConnell, 2010), intimidation by forest officials, and restricted access to forest resources that were previously prohibited.

Because organisations like the Grama Sabha were recognised as essential venues for confirming claims and streamlining the recognition process, the significance of participatory government was clear (Dandekar, 2018). But there were also noticeable gaps in participation and procedure clarity, indicating the need for initiatives to increase openness and community involvement. Furthermore, the discrepancy in respondents' capacity to exercise their individual and collective rights emphasises the necessity of focused initiatives that provide fair access to both kinds of rights (Drew et al., 2011).

Given the circumstances, the results emphasise how urgent it is to put targeted outreach initiatives into place in order to increase awareness, simplify complicated procedures, and remove obstacles to involvement (Singleton, 2000). Giving communities who depend on forests the information and resources they need to understand the FRA can increase participation and improve the Act's efficacy (Charnley & Poe, 2007). The study reaffirms the Act's importance as a framework for law as well as a tool for advancing cultural dignity, social fairness, and sustainable forest management.

CONCLUSION

Addressing historical injustices and empowering communities that depend on forests is made possible by the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The information gathered for this study, however, reveals important knowledge, involvement, and access gaps that prevent it from reaching its full potential. The difficulties respondents encountered highlight the urgent need for systemic changes in the Act's implementation, even in spite of its progressive design.

To bridge these gaps, it is crucial to promote active engagement in governance institutions like the Grama Sabha and increase knowledge of the Act's contents. The accessibility and inclusivity of the Act can be further improved by addressing perceived financial hurdles, guaranteeing the accountability of forest officials, and streamlining the claims procedure (Doucet et al., 2024). Overcoming these obstacles will allow the FRA to achieve its goals of protecting the rights of indigenous and forest-dwelling groups, empowering them, and advancing sustainable development (Kumar, 2024).

This study emphasises the value of a multifaceted strategy that incorporates community involvement, policy reform, and awareness-raising. Through these initiatives, the FRA can establish a global benchmark for inclusive and sustainable governance while also acting as a potent instrument for attaining justice, equity, and ecological preservation (Lockwood, 2010). The research's conclusions and insights serve as a basis for developing successful interventions that enhance the Act's long-term viability and its influence on the lives of its recipients.

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